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Soviet Opportunities in Syria

Numerous opportunities exist in Syria which we must expect the USSR to attempt to exploit. Some of these opportunities will be available for many months to come; others, such as the Hatay problem discussed under "1." below, must be exploited in the immediate future if full effect is to be gained. Because of this time factor, and because the situation is not generally well known, more background information is included here on this first opportunity than for the others discussed.

1. Propaganda aimed at worsening relations between Syria and Turkey has been emanating from Moscow for many weeks. This propaganda recently has decreased in volume, but if the USSR decides it is profitable to renew this verbal barrage, one topic that probably will be exploited is the Syrian claim that the Turkish province of Hatay rightfully belongs to Syria. It is worth emphasizing that, aside from this single territorial dispute, the Turks and Syrians have little to disagree over and, therefore, the USSR will be forced to manufacture points of difference between the two countries or to exacerbate minor differences.

The Soviets' approach to the Hatay problem has not yet become apparent, but if they intend to exploit the situation, they may well do so within the next few weeks since the 29th of November is the day commemorated in Syria as a day of mourning for the loss of Hatay. A resume of the historical and geographical background of this "lost" territory follows.

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With the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, Syria became an independent nation and the Sanjac of Alexandretta (later to be called Hatay) was included within Syrian territory. Disorders and general chaos within the new nation, however, resulted in the creation of a League of Nations mandate in 1922 with France as the governing power. In the 1930's, Turkey began negotiations with France for the annexation of the Sanjac. A reportedly rigged plebiscite was held in the Sanjac, disorder ensued, Turkish troops were sent in to re-establish order, and in 1939 France allowed Turkey to annex the disputed territory. It is now one of the 66 provinces of Turkey.

The Province of Hatay is located on the Mediterranean Sea at the western end of the Turkish-Syrian border. Along the sea is a narrow coastal plain containing relatively little of economic importance aside from the port of Iskenderon. This port, however is the third largest port in Turkey and that country's second most important naval base. The coastal plain is backed by a forested mountain spur, to the east of which lies an extensive lowland area. This lowland area contains the ancient city of Antioch and the agriculturally productive Orontes Valley.

Reliable information on the ethnological background of the 300,000 inhabitants of Hatay is not available. However, it appears that there is a substantial non-Turkish minority who speak Arabic and are closely related to their neighbors across the border in Syria. Turkish attempts to integrate these Arabic-speaking people have not been particularly successful. The younger generation is bilingual

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-- having learned Turkish in the schools -- but the language of home, shop, and field remains Arabic.

Despite the lack of integration into the Turkish social scene, there has been no significant separatist movement in Hatay. On the other hand, the claim has been made -- with considerable justification -- that the economy of the province would be improved if the people of Hatay had ready access to Syrian markets.

2. The USSR has the opportunity to tutor the Syrians vis-a-vis Turkey without direct Soviet intervention. For instance, the most productive farming districts in Syria are near the Turkish border. The opening of discussions over water problems in this arid area could be pursued in such a way as to create additional Turkish-Syrian animosity.

3. Soviet entrenchment in Syria in effect would encircle and isolate Turkey and seriously impair her position as the keystone between the NATO allies on the west and the Baghdad Pact allies on the east.

4. The Soviets may wish to continue to use Syria as a showcase to prove to the rest of the "neutral" nations, particularly India, that aid from the USSR comes with no strings attached. According to Col. Molloy, the ousted U.S. Army Attache, this is the chief advantage of Syria to the USSR.

5. Soviet influence in the Middle East could be used to intensify the rivalries between already suspicious Arab nations in an attempt to isolate those in which western influence may be effective.

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